



## 1776: The Fall Of New York City



*"General Howe ... marched with the greatest silence towards a pass some miles to the right of Flatbush, which being but little known we thought would be but weakly guarded. The advanced guard under General Clinton consisted of light dragoons, light infantry, grenadiers, and six battalions with some light guns. We got through the pass at daybreak without any opposition, and then turned to the left towards Bedford. When we were within a mile of that town, we heard firing in that part of the mountain where General Grant was expected. We fired two pieces of cannon to let him know we were at hand."*



Captain Rawdon, an officer in Howe's army described the relative ease with which the British army was able to move through the Jamaica Pass and come up behind the American outer lines. Leading this contingent of the British army were General Henry Clinton and Lord Percy. The only Patriot resistance the force met with was a guard of five men. Clinton's redcoats marched across a causeway and then over Shoemaker's Bridge, a narrow structure that forced them to go single file. Clinton's troops were followed by Percy's, bringing along the artillery. All the while, General von Heister's diversionary tactics maintained control over the attention of General Sullivan's Americans, who were no doubt convinced that they were feeling the full force of the British army.



The surprise given to the Patriots holding the position at the Bedford and Flatbush Passes, when they heard the cannon fire described above, was sudden and complete. Sullivan assembled a detachment of four hundred men to head toward the direction of the cannon fire. The detachment moved directly into the path of the British light infantry and dragoons. Sullivan's front was overwhelmed, and he and his detachment were promptly taken prisoner by the British. Clinton's force continued toward the rear of Lord Stirling's position at about the same time that Grant's redcoats were striking them from the southwest.



The patriots under Lord Stirling came to realize that they were outnumbered and soon to be overrun by Grant's troops from the south, von Heister's from the east, and Clinton and Percy's from the north. Many of them broke ranks and fled toward the safety of the inner line of defences positioned on the Brooklyn Heights. The Hessians under General von Heister flooded through the Flatbush Pass. They did not fire a shot, but rather charged forward with their bayonets leveled at the Patriots. The Patriots discovered the limitations of their muskets and rifles without bayonets as the Germans rushed upon them. Many of the Patriots used their weapons as clubs, but much of it was futile. Colonel Von Heeringen later noted that:

*"The enemy was covered by almoft impenetrable brufhwood, lines, abatis and redoubts. The greater part of the riflemen were pierced with the bayonet to the trees. Thefe dreadful people ought rather to be pitied than feared; they always require a quarter of an hour's time to load a rifle, and in the meantime they feel the effects of our balls and bayonets."*



The Germans, according to one British officer, had been told that the Americans were to be feared and therefore given no quarter. The advice was taken to heart by the Hessians who poured into the American line.



Nine hundred or so of the Americans under the command of Lord Stirling, including the Pennsylvania riflemen under Samuel Atlee, attempted to hold their position against the oncoming waves of redcoats and Hessians.



By eleven o'clock the British had overwhelmed all of the Patriot units holding the outer line except for Stirling's.



With British General Grant closing in on Stirling's position from the south and the Germans to the northeast, General Cornwallis, with the Seventy-First Regiment and the Second Grenadiers, maneuvered around to take up a position on the Gowanus Road. Stirling's rear was effectively blocked now.





**Lord Stirling ordered his men to retreat across the Gowanus Creek to his right rear. It was rising with the high tide that was flowing in, but it was the only route available for escape. Along with Major Morddecai Gist, Stirling personally led a contingent of two hundred and fifty of Smallwood's Maryland troops against Cornwallis in order to cover the retreat of his main body. The Maryland troops made five attempts to cut through the British line along the Gowanus Road at the Cortelyou House, but each time they failed to achieve their objective.**



**Ultimately, the Patriots were forced to surrender. Despite reinforcements sent over from New York by General Washington, the onslaught of the British and Germans was more than the Patriots holding the outer line of defenses could withstand.**



**General Howe, satisfied that the Patriots' outer line was conquered, did not continue any further, but halted his troops and settled in along the west slope of the Heights of Guan. The engagement, known as the "Battle of Long Island," was over by noon of the 27th of August, 1776. The American casualties amounted to 970, and 1,079 taken prisoner. The British suffered only 400 casualties during the engagement.**



**General Washington was determined to hold the inner line of defences on Long Island, at Brooklyn Heights. To that end, he ferried across the East River with reinforcements on the 28th of August. Upon arriving at Long Island, General Washington took command and began directing the strengthening of the defences. A cold, northeaster storm, that began to blow that afternoon, prevented any additional engagement with the British, who could likewise be seen digging in and preparing defences.**



**On the evening of the 28th General Washington held a conference with his officers, Major Generals Israel Putnam and Joseph Spencer, Brigadier Generals Thomas Mifflin, Alexander McDougall, Samuel Holden Parsons, John Morin Scott, James Wadsworth and John Fellows. The American army's defences, despite the effort the troops had put into them, appeared to be unsound. The council of war resulted in the decision to retire from Long Island and move back across the river to the Island of New York.**



**General Washington issued a statement to the troops about the decision to evacuate Long Island as part of his General Orders of 31 August. It reveals the reasons the officers felt the need to evacuate the Long Island defences in favor of those on Manhattan Island where the rest of the American army was stationed.**

*"Both officers and foldiers are informed that the Retreat from Long Ifland was made by the unanimous advice of all the General Officers, not from any doubts of the fpirit of the troops, but becaufe they found the troops very much fatigued with hard duty and*

*divided into many detachments, while the enemy had their Main Body on the Ifland, and capable of receiving afsiftance from the fhipping: In thefe circumftances it was thought unfafe to tranfport the whole of an Army on an Ifland, or to engage them with a part, and therefore unequal numbers; whereas now one whole Army is collected together; without Water intervening, while the enemy can receive little afsiftance from their fhips; their Army is, and muft be divided into many bodies, and fatigued with keeping up a communication with their Ships; whereas ours is connected, and can act together; They muft affect a landing under fo many difadvantages, that if officers and foldiers are vigilant, and alert, to prevent furprife, and add fpirit when they approach, there is no doubt of our fucefs."*



In a letter dated 31 August, 1776, General Washington sent a more detailed explanation of the evacuation to the delegates assembled in Congress at Philadelphia.

*1st. Becaufe Our advanced party had met with a defeat, & the wood was loft, where we expected to make a principal Stand.*

*2nd. The great lofs fuftained in the death or Captivity of Several valuable Officers and their Battallions, or a large part of them, has occafioned great confufion and difcouragement among the Troops.*

*3rd. The Heavy rains which fell Two days and Nights with but Little Intermiffion have Injured the Arms and Spoiled a great part of the Ammunition, and the Soldiery being without Cover and obliged to lay in the Lines, were worn out, and It was to be feared would not be retained in them by any Order.*

*4th. From the Time the Enemy moved from Flatbufh, Several large Ships had attempted to get up as Supposed into the Eaft River to cut off our Communication by which the whole Army would have been deftroyed. But the wind being N. E. could not effect It.*

*5th. Upon confulting with perfons of knowledge of the Harbour, they were of Opinion that Small Ships might come between Long Island and Governors Ifland where there are no obftructions and which would cut off the communication effectually, and who were alfo of Opinion the Hulks funk, between Governor's Ifland, and the City of New York, were no fufficient Security for obftructing that pafsage.*

*6th. Tho' our Lines were fortified with fome ftrong Redoubts, yet a Great part of them were weak being only abbattied with Brufh, and affording no ftrong cover, fo that there was reafon to apprehend they might be forced, which would have put our Troops in confufion, and having no retreat, they muft have been cut to pieces, or made prifoners.*



*7th. The Divided ftate of the Troops rendered our defence very precarious, and the duty of defending long and extenfive Lines, at fo many different places, without proper conveniences and cover fo very fatiguing, that the Troops have become difpirited by their Incefsant duty and watching.*

*8th. Becaufe the enemy had fent feveral fhips of war into the found, to a Place called flufhing bay, and from the information received, that a part of their troops, were moving acrofs long ifland, that way, there was reafon to apprehend, they meant to pafs overland, and form an incampment above King's bridge, in order to cut off, and prevent all communication between our army and the country beyond them or to get in our rear.*



**Washington did not want the British to be aware of that decision until the last possible moment. To that effect, it was decided that the army would make a quiet, covert evacuation of the Brooklyn Heights defences. During the evening and night of 29 August the Patriots executed their plan without the British realizing it was happening. As one regiment retired from their post, the remaining troops spread out to cover the area evacuated. According to Major Benjamin Tallmadge, the Adjutant for Colonel John Chester's Connecticut Regiment:**

*"To move fo large a body of troops with all their necefsary appendages acrofs a river full a mile wide, with a rapid current, in face of a victorious, well-difciplined army nearly three times as numerous as his own and a fleet capable of ftopping the navigation fo that not one boat could have pafsed over, feemed to prefent moft formidable obftacles. But in face of thefe difficulties, the Commander-in-Chief fo arranged his bufinefs that on the evening of the twenty-ninth by ten o'clock, the troops began to retire from the lines in fuch a manner that no chafm was made in the lines, but as one regiment left their ftation on guard, the remaining troops moved to the right and left and filled up the vacancies, while General Wafhington took his ftation at the ferry and fuperintended the embarkation of the troops."*



**It took only about six hours for the full evacuation of the 9,500 men along with all their equipment, provisions and horses to be completed. As the 30th dawned, there were still a few Patriot regiments at the defences on Long Island. A heavy fog settled in, though, and the last of the troops were able to evacuate without the British noticing the American exodus. The Patriots had to leave six cannon behind because, as General Washington noted in a letter to the Congress dated 31 August: "...the Wheels of the Carriages funk up to the Hobbs, and rendered it impofsible for our whole force to drag them..."**



**Otherwise the evacuation from Long to Manhattan Island was a success, and caught the British unawares. The Moravian pastor, Brother Shewkirk, commented about the Patriot troops**

after their arrival on Manhattan Island:

*"In the morning, unexpectedly and to the surprize of the city, it was found that all that could come back was come back; and that they had abandoned Long Island, when many had thought to surround the King's troops and make them prisoners with little trouble. The language was now otherwise. It was a surprising change: the merry tones on drums and fifes had ceased, and they were hardly heard for a couple of days. It seemed a general damp had spread, and the flight of the scattered people up and down the streets was indeed moving. Many looked sickly, emaciated, cast down, etc.; the wet clothes, tents – as many as they had brought away – and other things were lying about before the houses and in the streets to dry. In general everything seemed to be in confusion."*



Following the American evacuation of their defences on Long Island, both armies settled in to regroup before initiating additional forays against the other.



During the lull, General Howe sent captured American General Sullivan to appear before the delegates assembled in the Continental Congress to request a meeting to discuss a peaceful resolution to the conflict. A stipulation of such a proposed meeting was that the American representatives would be treated as private citizens. Howe, in the same way as the Parliament of Great Britain, did not recognize the colonies as being independent, despite the recently issued *Declaration*. Therefore he stated that he would only receive representatives who chose to meet with him as private, interested citizens of the British Colonies. Sullivan arrived in Philadelphia on 02 September, 1776. The Congress debated the issue and, on the 5th, replied with the answer that as *"representatives of free and independent states of America"* it would not be proper for any of the delegates to meet with General Howe as private citizens. A committee of three (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Edward Rutledge) was appointed to travel northward to the British camp on Long Island to confer with General Howe. The committee left Philadelphia on 09 September and arrived back on the 13th. Their meeting with General Howe lasted only three hours. General Howe insisted that the colonies once again swear allegiance to the crown. Then and only then would he, as a representative of the crown, be able to discuss the matter of reconciliation. In turn, the committee informed General Howe that the Declaration of Independence could not be rescinded by the delegates assembled in Congress in view of the fact that it had been issued in accordance with the instructions of the delegates' constituents. The committee, in the report they submitted on 17 September to the Congress, noted:

*"We gave it as our Opinion to his lordship, that a return to the domination of Great Britain was not now to be expected. We mentioned the repeated humble petitions of the colonies to the king and parliament, which had been treated with contempt, and answered only by additional injuries; the unexampled patience we had shown under their tyrannical government, and that it was not till the last act of parliament which denounced was against us, and put us out of the king's protection, that we declared our*



*independence; that this declaration had been called for by the people of the colonies in general; that every colony had approved of it, when made, and all now confidered themselves as independent ftates..."*



One of the more unusual events to occur during the War took place during the lull in the fighting. David Bushnell was given the go-ahead to try out his *water machine*. Dubbed the *Turtle* because of its shape, this first attempt at submarine technology was constructed of oak timbers bound together with iron bands. The cracks between the timbers were caulked and sealed with tar to prevent leakage. Bushnell submerged the craft by opening a hatch that allowed water to fill a compartment in the hull. When he wanted to surface, he operated a foot pump to pump out the water. Various hand devices were used to propel the craft and to steer it. Bushnell proposed the use of his craft to maneuver beneath the British ships in the harbor in order to attach bombs to their hulls. The trial run took place on 06 September. The submerging and maneuvering aspects of the project were a success, but the bomb could not be attached to the British ship's hull; it floated into the East River and exploded there harmlessly.



In a letter dated the 8th of September, General Washington informed the Congress of his intention to remove the American army from New York City.

*"Since I had the Honor of addrefsing you on the 6th inftant, I have called a Council of the General Officers, in order to take a full and comprehenfive view of our Situation and thereupon form fuch a plan of future defence, as may be immediately purfued and fubject to no other Alteration than a change of Operations on the Enemy's fide may occafion.*

*"It is now extremely obvious, from all Intelligence, from their movements and every other circumftance, that having landed their whole Army on Long Ifland (except about 4000, on Staten Ifland) they mean to enclofe us on the Ifland of New York by taking poft in out Rear, while the Shipping effectually fecure the Front, and thus either by cutting off our communication with the Country, oblige us to fight them on their own Terms, or furrender at difcretion, or by a brilliant Stroke endeavor to cut this Army in pieces and fecure the Collection of Arms and Stores which they well know we fhall not be foon able to replace.*

*"Having therefore their Syftem unfolded to us, it became an important confideration how it could be moft fuccefsfully oppofed. On every fide there is a Choice of difficulties and every Meafure on our part (however painful the reflection is from experience) to be formed with fome Apprehenfion that all our Troops will not do their duty.*

*"In deliberating on this Queftion it was impofsible to forget, that Hiftory, our own*

*experience, the advice of our ablest Friends in Europe, the fears of the Enemy, and even the Declarations of Congress demonstrate, that on our Side the War should be defensive... That we should on all Occasions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risk, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never be drawn.*

*"We are now in a strong Post, but not an Impregnable one, nay acknowledged by every man of Judgement to be untenable, unless the Enemy will make an Attack upon Lines, when they can avoid it and their Movements indicate that they mean to do so. To draw the whole Army together in order to arrange the defence proportionate to the extent of Lines and works, would leave the Country open to an Approach and put the fate of this Army and its Stores on the hazard of making a successful defence in the City, or the Issue of an Engagement out of it. On the other hand to abandon a City, which has been by some deemed defensible and on whose Works much Labour has been bestowed, has a tendency to dispirit the Troops and enfeeble our Cause..."*

*"With these and many other circumstances before them, the whole Council of General Officers, met Yesterday, in order to adopt some general line of Conduct to be pursued at this important crisis... We all agreed that the Town was not tenable if the Enemy resolved to bombard and Cannonade it.*

*"It was concluded to arrange the Army under three Divisions 5000 to remain for the defence of the City, 9000 to remove to King's Bridge... the remainder to occupy the intermediate space and support either... there were some Generals in whose Judgement great confidence is to be reposed, that were for an immediate removal from the City, urging the great danger of one part of our Army being cut off, before the other can support it... But they were overruled by a Majority, who thought for the present a part of our force might be kept here and attempt to maintain the City a while longer.*

*"That the Enemy mean to winter in New York there can be no doubt; that with such an Armament they can drive us out is equally clear. The Congress having resolved, that it should not be destroyed, nothing seems to remain but to determine the time of their taking Possession..."*



As events would reveal, the "time of their taking Possession" was the 15th of September, 1776. During the early morning hours, five warships took up positions in Kip's Bay. At 10:00am British troops from Long Island began to arrive in eighty-five flatboats. An hour later, the warships opened a bombardment of the Patriot entrenchments. The militia manning the defences, commanded by Captain William Douglas, fled as the torrent of shot rained down upon them. The 4,000 British and Hessian troops who had ferried across the bay met no resistance as they moved northward toward Harlem Heights. General Washington, hearing the sounds of the bombardment, rode southward from Harlem Heights, on the way meeting the fleeing militia. He tried to get them to form a defensive line, but they continued to retreat in confusion. It is said that the General



struck at the fleeing men with his riding cane, but to no avail.



General Israel Putnam, who had been left in charge of the troops to hold the City, succeeded in rallying the retreating troops. He led them in an orderly withdrawal northward along the west side of the Manhattan Island. The British, meanwhile were traveling northward along the east side of Manhattan Island, apparently unaware that their enemy was parallel to them. The 5000 or so of Putnam's retreating troops arrived at the Patriot encampment at Harlem Heights despite the loss of 367 men. The remainder joined General William Heath's 9000 men and prepared for the eminent British attack. But, as on Long Island, the British chose not to press forward. Instead they made camp at McGowan's Pass, some two miles south of Harlem Heights, and through which the only road linking New York City to the northern part of Manhattan Island passed.



A couple of reasons may be given for the failure of the British to press forward and attack the American Patriots on the 16th. The first, and primary, reason was that the transport of his troops from Long Island did not proceed as smoothly as planned. As a result, his plan to strike west across Manhattan Island and cut off the American troops holding the city of New York had to be delayed nearly three hours - by which time General Putnam had already made his way north to the safety of the rest of the American army at Harlem Heights. The second reason is a more humorous, and not as credible, one. General Howe, while forming his troops in the vicinity of Murray's Hill, was supposedly invited by Mrs. Robert Murray, a Patriot sympathizer, to repair to their house for a bite of cake and some wine. Although he had not originally intended it, Howe tarried a few more hours, until it was too late to stop Putnam's retreat northward. Whether or not the tale was true, Mrs. Murray became widely known as the person who saved the American army from sure defeat.



On the next day, the 17th, a detachment of 120 Rangers under the command of Captain Thomas Knowlton rode out to scout out the British camp. Meeting a body of British infantry, they exchanged fire and the Battle of Harlem Heights was begun. A unit of the Black Watch advanced against Knowlton's left flank, and he gave the order for his Americans to retreat. The British, upon reaching the base of Harlem Heights, halted their advance and derisively blew bugle horns in mimicry of a fox chase's ending signal. General Washington directed a force of the American troops into a frontal assault on the British while another detachment engaged in flanking movements, catching the British off guard. The British were pushed back in a series of such frontal and flanking movements by the Patriots under Generals Putnam, Greene and George Clinton. Despite the loss of New York City, the Americans scored a victory by succeeded in halting the British offensive. More importantly, though was the psychological victory for the Patriots. The engagement at Harlem Heights, despite being moreso a small skirmish than a "battle" showed that the American troops still had some fight in them. They might have lost New York City to the British, but they certainly had not lost the War.



**General Sir William Howe wrote a letter to Lord George Germaine dated September 21, in which he described the taking of New York. In his report, Howe made no mention of the retreat of his own army after the fight at Harlem Heights.**

*"My Lord, I have the satisfaction to inform your Lordship of his Majesty's troops being in possession of New York.*

*"Upon the Rebels abandoning their lines at Brooklyn, the King's army moved from Bedford, leaving Lieut. Gen Heister encamped upon the heights of Brooklyn with two brigades of Hessians, and one brigade of British at Bedford, and took five positions in the neighbourhood of New Town, Bushwick, Hell-Gate, and Flushing.*

*"The two islands of Montserrat and Buchanan were occupied, and batteries raised against the enemy's work at Horens's Hook, commanding the passage at Hell-Gate.*

*"On the 15th in the morning, three ships of war passed up the North River as far as Bloomingdale's, to draw the enemy's attention to that side; and the first division of troops, consisting of the light infantry, the British reserve, the Hessians, grenadiers and chasseur, under the command of Lieut. Gen. Clinton, having with him Lieut. Gen Earl Cornwallis, Maj. Gen. Vaughn, Brig. Gen. Leslie, and Col. Donop, embarked at the head of New-Town Creek and landed about noon upon New York island, three miles from the town, at a place called Kepp's Bay, under the fire of two 40 gun ships; and three frigates, as per margin, Commodore Hotham having the direction of the ships and boats.*

*"The Rebels had troops in their works round Kepp's Bay, but their attention being engaged in expectation of the King's troops landing at Stuyvesant's Cove, Horens's Hook, and at Harlem, which they had reason to conclude, Kepp's Bay became only a secondary object of their care. The fire of the shipping being so well directed, and so incessant, the enemy could not remain in their works, and the descent was made without the least opposition.*

*"The conduct of the officers of the navy does them much honour; and the behaviour of the seamen belonging to the ships of war and transports, employed to row the boats, was highly meritorious. Much praise in particular is due to the Masters and men of six transports, that passed the town on the evening of the 14th under heavy fire, being volunteers, to take troops on board for the more speedy disembarkation of the second division.*

*"The British immediately took post upon the commanding height of Inclineburg, and the Hessians moving towards New York, fell in with a body of Rebels that were retiring from Stuyvesant's Cove; some firing ensued, by which a Brig. Gen. Other Officers, and*



*several men of the Rebels were killed and wounded, with the loss of four men killed, and eight wounded, on the part of the Hessians.*

*"As soon as the second embarkation was landed, the troops advanced towards a corps of the enemy upon a rising ground three miles from Inclineburg, towards King's Bridge, having McGowan's posts in their rear, upon which they immediately retired to the main body of their army upon Morris's Height.*

*"The enemy having evacuated New York soon after the army landed, a Brigade took possession of the works in the evening.*

*"The prisoners made in the course of this day were about 20 Officers and 300 men - The enclosed return will show the artillery and stores taken.*

*"The position the King's army took, on the 15th in the evening, was with the right to Horen's Hook, and the left at the North River near to Bloomingdale; the Rebel army occupying the ground with extensive works on both sides of King's Bridge, and a redoubt with cannon upon a height on the west side of the North River, opposite to the Blue Bell, where the enemy have their principal work; in which positions both armies still continue.*

*"On the 16th, in the morning, a large party of the enemy having passed under cover of the woods, near to the advanced posts of the army, the 2d and 3d battalions of light infantry, supported by the 42d regiment, pushed forward, and drove them back to their entrenchments, from whence the enemy, observing they were not in force, attacked them with near 3000 men, which occasioned the march of the reserve with two field-pieces, a battalion of Hessian grenadiers, and the company of chasseurs, to prevent the corps engaged from being surrounded; but the light infantry, and the 42d regiment, with the assistance of the chasseurs and field-pieces, repulsed the enemy with considerable loss, and obliged them to retire within their works. The enemy's loss is not ascertained; but from the accounts of deserters it is agreed, that they had not less than 300 killed and wounded, and among them a Colonel and Major killed. We had eight Officers wounded, most of them very slightly, 14 men killed, and about seventy wounded."*



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